

Merits and demerits of utilitarianism



Over the history of philosophy, utilitarianism has been widely regarded as an influential and convincing approach to normative ethics. It would not be possible to dissect and thoroughly discuss the many varieties of utilitarian ethics instead I will attempt to discuss the theory in broader less distinctive terms, and in particular the views of prominent utilitarian theorists John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Utilitarianism is generally held to be the view that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good. There are many ways to understand Utilitarianism as a code of ethics. It is important however to bear in mind that the theory exists as a form of consequentialism whereby for an action to be right, the consequences produced must be good or desirable. Essentially stripped of most underlying complexities utilitarianism is essentially about maximising the good for the greatest number of people.

Utilitarianism as described by Bentham is “ the greatest happiness or greatest felicity principle”. Mill believed that for an action to be deemed right it must promote or result in happiness, likewise a wrong action would be one that brings about displeasure. However this could be considered a quite egocentric and self satisfying claim if it were not for the important establishment that it is not the facilitators own happiness that matters but the happiness of a majority. Personally it seems that utilitarianism achieves its goals by promoting moral values of honour so that all individuals work to serve the interests of others, in my view, an unrealistic expectation. In this sense it could be regarded as a standard for moral behaviour. Deontological ethics provide a powerful contrast to utilitarianism, which does not place

utmost importance on the consequence of an action when determining the moral validity of an action.

Utilitarianism as a concept essentially determines the moral worth of an action by its usefulness. If your action maximizes utility or usefulness to a large number of people it is deemed good. It is thus a form of consequentialism, (the moral worth of an action is determined by its outcome.) Jeremy Bentham is largely credited with developing a structured theory on Utilitarianism. Whilst his initial input is invaluable it would be ignorant to disregard the contributions of the man who greatly improved upon Bentham's theories, John Stuart Mill.

Both Bentham and Mill sought to use utilitarianism to help structure society. Mill believed we had rights if they were underwritten by utility. John Stuart Mill developed Bentham's theory of utilitarianism and despite disagreeing with part of Bentham's work, especially on the nature of happiness, they were similar. Bentham claimed that there were no qualitative differences between pleasures, only quantitative ones. Mill believed Bentham's hedonism was too egalitarian. His view that unsophisticated pleasures particularly those of a sensual nature, were just as good as more sophisticated and complex pleasures conflicted strongly with Mill's view of clear differentiation between pleasures. Bentham's belief that qualitative differences in pleasures were nonexistent left him open to criticism that human pleasures were of no more value than animal pleasures. By this admission it was believed if there could be no differentiation of pleasures we were as morally complex as the common pig, tied to their sentience.

Mill's rule utilitarianism involves encouraging people to undertake pleasurable activities as long as they belong to what he deems a higher pleasure, such as reading a piece of well articulated philosophy or attending the opera. His notion of what constitutes a higher pleasure is dictated by certain class values and shows an arrogance in this assumption of ordering of pleasures. Only the individual can truly determine the level of pleasure. His presumption that intellectual pleasures are more satisfactory and desirable than those of a more sensual nature also reveal a certain bias of character. It seems reasonable that the decision would be left to a person who has experienced both "lower and higher" pleasures to decide what is more fulfilling and in this regard, whilst I do not certainly know I can make an educated guess he led a life without much of the more sensual pleasure. To some this seems to mean that Mill really wasn't a hedonistic utilitarian. Maybe it is simply the degree of knowledge an individual has with the activity that determines the amount of pleasure they can receive from it, therefore their pleasure is limited by their socialisation. But I would propose that the less educated pleasure of drinking a beer in a pub and watching sport, compared to watching the opera and conversing in an intellectual nature have no difference if one's highest pleasure in both cases stated is simply that. By the same token, to remove a lower socio economic class citizen and place them within the opera which has no cultural context or relevance, they would find it a highly dissatisfying pleasure. There is no set scale of validating higher and lower pleasures, for the individual interpretation ranges too greatly. Instead the greatest pleasure you experience becomes at the top of your individual rankings and depending on your socialisation you will likewise rank all other experiences you encounter.

Whilst it is true a lower class citizen may not encounter a broadened range of intellectually stimulating pleasures, this is not to say they need to in order to be fulfilled. Good and pleasure are ratified by the person that experiences them and the culture they live in.

It can be said in critique of Utilitarianism that it only looks at the consequences of actions, and disregards the intention that motivate them. This today seems like a huge moral oversight, especially regarding the legal system for where for one to be proven guilty upon criminal charges both, Actus Reus-the guilty act- and Mens Rea-the guilty mind must be present. Certain crimes such as man slaughter and rape do not require Mens Rea but this is an exception. It would seem that society does not place a greater importance upon the intention of the act over the consequence consistently, rather it is situation dependent. However an interesting contradiction, an action with bad intentions that inadvertently causes overall good is not judged so harshly. Many utilitarians argue that utilitarianism, although it is consequentialist, is not so simply restricted. While the end product of a negatively motivated action may result in good (such as the collective vigilante action to kill a paedophile) this does not mean utilitarians promote negative or hateful actions to produce a greater good. In this sense, intentions are important to utilitarians, in as much as they tend to lead to certain actions, which themselves lead to certain outcomes.

Utilitarianism can be as complex as the interpretation and thought of the individual applying it to an ethical situation. For every situation the choice between actions is straightforward, choose the action that results in the greatest utility. However determining what act will have the greatest benefit

can be rather more difficult. Our perceptions of usefulness may differ, as most certainly does the individual differ in their ideas of good. Certainly a well functioning society promotes an overarching theme of what is right or good but this does not include all perspectives. Utilitarianism does not care for the minority opinion. If an action can procure greatest good for a greater amount of people but causes pain and suffering to a smaller population in the process, is it justifiable? Does the number or ratio of people pleased to dissatisfied have an effect? Can we make the value of a human life, rights, or opinion quantifiable? It is not always at the beginning of an action what the outcome will be, nor is it always feasible to accurately judge who and how it will affect people. Judging an action by the outcome is therefore hard to do before the consequences are clear; surely it seems better to judge an action by its intention, even though there are also problems with this. Furthermore the calculations required to adequately make an informed judgement based upon utilitarian ethics can be complex and time consuming. In some instances, the people making decisions based upon utilitarian ethics may have no emotional interest. Whilst from a bias point of view this would seem sensible, is it really a humane thing to calculate issues pertaining to humans without emotion? It seems to some point illogical, computerised and to some point a product of a desensitised age. In fact many individuals faced with decisions of importance may not have the ethical or moral intelligence to adequately navigate a complex issue requiring ethical deliberation; utilitarianism would be dangerous in the hands of policy makers or people of power who have limited capacity to think carefully. It can simply offer too easy a solution to a much more complex issue.

In response to objections such as these, certain supporters of utilitarianism have put forth a modification of the theory. The original form of Utilitarianism that has so many flaws is to be called Act utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism declares that each individual action is to be assessed directly in terms of the utility principle. A desirable and much needed improvement is rule utilitarianism where about behaviour is evaluated by rules that, if universally followed would lead to the greatest good for the greatest number.

Thus, rule utilitarianism could address some of the flaws previously highlighted by using the utility principle to validate and give substance to the rules that protected essential human rights and the universal prohibition of certain actions. None the less this in turn raises problems, if the justification of the rule that protects human rights is found in the utility principle, what about the exception where breaching these rights leads to the attainment of the greatest good for the greatest number? It seems as if rule utilitarianism is no longer utilitarianism in the true sense of the word. For it to be regarded as such, it must maintain the utility principle as its definitive standard, and no rules or rights designed to protect the greatest number can stand in its way. This is where Act utilitarianism must once again be called into place, despite its many flaws.

Despite the inconvenient contradiction within rule utilitarianism, a system of rules would help a majority of the time, even if they only served in an advisory capacity. It would help make choices, based upon prior occurrences, and negate the need for continuous calculations in most but not all situations. Somewhat similar to case law where one persons actions and the courts determination upon them set precedent for the next issue that

similarly arises. Indeed this invokes instant opposition to the idea based upon the fact situations should be dealt with on individual merit but to proceed there must be compromises. I believe that whilst Utilitarianism is in theory understandable and rational, it is best left to the few that are capable of applying it successfully. I could not base an entire life's decisions of the basis of utility, I would not end up a "happy" being, and I believe that no one could, constantly thinking of the greater good, we are selfish creatures. The thought of those in power using utilitarianism to determine appropriate courses of actions in certain ethical situations unsettles me. Especially regarding contentious issues such as asylum seekers, where the happiness or desires of the majority are not always well informed. The greatest good is rarely served accurately when the uninformed or misguided masses follow rules out of duty and leave the difficult and subtle calculations solely to those in authority. This is a dangerous attitude and far from involving or considered. There becomes too much control vested in those with positions of power and in the hands of a dictator the masses could easily suffer.

In conclusion Utilitarianism as a normative code of ethics is only as useful as the person who interprets and uses it. It is but a tool to navigate ethical considerations, one that must be used knowing fully the positives and negatives to be weighed. Perhaps it is a code of ethics that is valuable but imperfect for humans; we are in our own judgement never perfect, we cannot make decisions that please everyone; this is as far as I can see in difficult situations, impossible. Instead it is in our best interests to act for the greater good, as what would be the sense in displeasing the majority unless the majority is morally repugnant and evil. Somehow this consideration

scares me, for surely there will come a time where my wills are no longer in the best interests of the majority. Do my opinion and feelings no longer count to a utilitarian decision maker? This is certainly a complication, but with sound reasoning and sensible interpretation utilitarianism will work, but only for those whose intentions coincide with the majority. Utilitarianism will always be rationalised and beneficial, even if only for the greater good.